

Dreaming

by Pit Viper of Doom

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Summary: This had to be a dream; it was the only explanation. It was the sort of thing that only happened in bizarre, messed up nightmares that you laughed at when you woke the next morning. But against all logic, this was not a dream. Raven had betrayed them.

Dreaming

****This is sort of a companion/prequel to my other ToV story, Amends. I tried to stay in the character's heads and keep from just restating events at certain points, and you can decide for yourself if I succeeded. Feedback, be it criticism or compliment, is always welcome.****

* * *

><p>It was a surreal moment for Karol.<p>

Most people who knew him thought him a coward, and he was rarely in any position to protest such a judgment. He'd heard it all before, that bravery was not the absence of fear, that fear was healthy and meant you were paying attention, and that courage was just a matter of fighting through it. He had the fear part down; it was the fighting through it that constantly gave him trouble.

He wasn't afraid now, though. He was... confused? That barely seemed to scratch the surface. He should have been afraid; he should have been angry, but... at the moment, he felt nothing. It was as though his mind had detached itself from the proceedings and was viewing them as though they were a particularly vivid daydream.

When Raven drew his sword, Karol honestly expected him to toss it aside, laughingly drop that far too formal manner of speech, and puckishly ridicule them all for falling for the act. They would laugh it off, maybe Rita would punch him, and they would all go on after

Alexei and get Estelle back. That was what was supposed to happen. Because this was Raven, for goodness' sake.

What was not supposed to happen was for Raven to continue in that cold, clipped voice that Karol barely recognized, and introduce himself with a name Karol did not know.

"Schwann Oltorain, First Captain of the Imperial Knights. Ready to do battle."

That wasn't right. That wasn't the high-ranking member of Altosk, the Don's right-hand man. That wasn't the shady, slippery character Karol had come to respect and admire as much as he had the Don himself.

This had to be a dream; it was the only possible explanation. It certainly felt like one to Karol, whose head was still reeling with confusion, because honestly, he wouldn't have seen this coming in a million years. It was the sort of thing that only happened in bizarre, messed up nightmares that you laughed at when you woke the next morning.

The clash of metal on metal tugged at Karol's nerves, but it ultimately did nothing to wrench his mind out of its daze. At the sight of Raven engaging Yuri in combat, he moved automatically, flanking his guild comrade with his own weapon held high, ready to attack or heal if need be. He lashed out almost half-heartedly at Raven, who batted him back with what appeared to be minimal effort. The vibrations from Raven's sword blow made his hands sting, and the pain cleared his head enough for him to question the pure wrongness of it all.

"Raven, why?" he asked, almost plaintively. "Why?"

He expected regret. He expected sorrow over having to fight his own companions. At the very least, he expected a "Sorry, kid," if nothing else. Just... something.

"I will tell you again. I am not Raven."

It was a familiar voice that he could no longer recognize. If the first fierce blow from Raven hadn't brought him sharply around, then that coldly delivered declaration did. Against all logic, this was not a dream. Raven had... betrayed them.

Karol threw himself into the fight, lashing out with his hammer and his artes, and throwing out healing spells to those who needed them. But his heart was not in it, and most of his attacks either missed entirely or were nimbly dodged. Dimly he was aware of Rita's shrill fury, of Judith's sad voice that remained as calm and mellow as ever, of Repede's guttural snarling, and of Yuri's stone-cold anger.

In truth, attacking was not Karol's intent, and really hurting Raven was the last thing on his mind. He could leave that gritty chore to his far more competent friends, because at the moment, all he wanted was for Raven "or Schwann or whoever he was" to look at him. He wanted to look the man in the eye and see if there was anything left of the jaunty, prankish complainer he'd thought he'd known.

He needed to see if the man that had filled the hole in his heart

left by the Don's death really had been nothing but a lie.

Karol saw Schwann spring back, narrowly avoiding a cleave from Dein Nomos, and with a sick feeling he remembered why Yuri had left the knights, and what the young man had vowed to do to powerful men who escaped justice. There was a small, terrible possibility that Raven would not survive this fight, and that Karol would be left with an unspoken confession on the tip of his tongue and a once-more empty place in his heart.

As frightened as he was of Raven having been a lie, Karol was unspeakably terrified of losing the old man this way without telling him the truth he'd been holding back.

If Yuri or Rita ridiculed him after it, well, then he could live with it.

It wasn't until he spoke that he realized he was fighting back tears. "Damn it," he swore. "I really liked you, Raven." That wasn't the truth he'd been hiding; he'd made no secret of that. The words stuck in his throat, but he summoned what minimal courage he possessed and forced them out. "I couldn't tell you before, but... if my dad wereâ€" "

Raven took the briefest of instances to look him in the eye before he returned to the fight. "How unfortunate," he cut him off impassively. "'Raven' isn't here."

He spoke the name "Raven" in the tone of a long-suffering parent humoring a child's imaginary friend. That alone could have shattered Karol, even without the single look he'd caught from the man.

His eyes were as flat and emotionless as river pebbles. The easygoing smile they'd held, with the ever-present spark of mischief, had vanished as if it had never been.

From there, the fight seemed to drag out for an eternity to Karol. His heart had never been in it in the first place, but now the fight had gone out of him almost entirely. For the rest of the battle he stood back and healed his friends, the way Estelle would have done had she been with them, until eventually, inevitably, Schwann began to falter beneath still-superior numbers. The boy kept his mouth shut, avoided looking at him, and told himself it was all a dream. It wasn't, but for all he knew, he would go mad if he told himself so. And when Schwann abruptly halted his attack, allowing Yuri to swing Dein Nomos unhindered at his unprotected chest, Karol wished he could wake up.

That was when the situation promptly turned its head. Again. Several times.

Schwann's blastia heart. The collapsing shrine. Karol could feel the blurry detachment turn back to the old, familiar fear. Schwann was not dead, though not for lack of trying on Yuri's part, but it seemed that they all soon would be unless they thought of something fast. From the fear he could see plainly on Judith and Rita's faces, and in Repede's bristling fur, he could see there was little reason to hope.

Though the revelation of Schwann's blastia had awakened a small part

of him, the same stubbornly optimistic little voice that insisted that he could be brave if he really tried, or that one day Nan would be a little kinder to him. Now it was wondering if Alexei hadn't simply forced Schwann to do his bidding, if he hadn't threatened to take away the life he'd given.

Karol hardly allowed himself to hope, especially given the way Schwann sat cross-legged on the ground, head bowed as though waiting for death, seemingly heedless as Yuri shook and berated him angrily. With what could Alexei threaten a man who wanted to die?

"I thought the guilds never quit until the job was done!" Yuri's voice rang out harsh and stern above the rumble of collapsing stonework. "Wasn't that his dying wish?" Karol winced as the memory of the Don's death struck him afresh. "You go on living until the end!"

Karol was close to giving up on Raven. In another few moments, he might have dejectedly called Yuri back, urged him to help them find another way out, if there was one.

"Man, you really can be a downer sometimes, ya know that?"

Karol's breath caught in his throat. That was it, and just barely in time. That was the voice he had so wanted to hear, with its lazy slang and its touch of humor. Without thinking, he made his way forward just as the man was getting to his feet, the hope that he had been wrestling with finally rising within him. He halted before Schwann, searching his face, not altogether certain what he was looking for. Schwann gave him a nod, and his heart lightened. It wasn't... quite the same, but it was close.

It was close enough to Raven.

That he could open an exit for them with a single arrow was a bonus in Karol's eyes, and for the first time since Schwann had appeared, he let himself relax.

There was an ominous rumbling over the exit Raven had made, and a massive portion of the ceiling slowly dislodged and plummeted toward them. Karol froze, wide eyes darting between their escape route and the falling stone.

A heavy, gauntleted hand pushed him out of the way, and he overbalanced and fell backward, shutting his eyes and waiting for the ceiling to finish its descent. The crash never came, and blinding light made his vision flare red. He opened his eyes, squinting in the blazing brightness.

Raven stood over him, bearing the ceiling above him as the core of his blastia glowed like a star. Karol gaped at him, first in awe, then in alarm, and finally in cold realization. If Raven let go, even to make his own escape, he was as good as dead. And he couldn't hold it forever.

"Raven!" he cried desperately. A voice rang out behind him, Rita's, but he barely heard her words.

Blood showed starkly against Raven's face, trickling down his forehead and between his eyes. His unbound hair hung in a tousled

mess over half his face, and his voice was tight with desperate effort as he shouted to them all. "I can't keep this up forever!" he told them harshly. "Get outta here!"

No...

"Alexei's headed for the capital," Raven went on, drained but determined. "There he'll implement the final stages of his plan. The rest..." Raven's voice was resigned. "...I leave in your hands."

"Raven!" Karol screamed. He wanted the man to look at him, but Raven's attention was still on those closest to the exit. "_Raven!_"
Just look down... please, Raven...

"Karol, come on!" Yuri called out.

"But..." Karol's gaze were fixed on the man standing over him, tears gathering in his eyes. _But I didn't see it before. I have to see it, just one last time..._

"Move!" Yuri commanded.

Damn you, Raven, LOOK AT ME!

And Raven, as if hearing his silent demand, turned his head to meet his eyes. And there it was.

There was the old spark that Schwann would never have, that light of mischief that was almost boyish, for all Raven's complaints of his age. It was there for Karol to see, in Raven's pale blue eyes, framed in blood and disheveled, unbound hair. Raven smiled at him, and gave him an encouraging nod. Reluctantly, Karol scrambled to his feet, looked back at Raven once more, and dashed for the exit. It wasn't fair, he thought, that Raven had to die so soon after realizing his mistakes and trying to fix them. As Karol made it through the blasted doorway and down the dark corridor in pursuit of his friends, he flinched when he heard the crash of heavy stone upon stone as the ceiling finally met the floor.

When Karol stumbled to a halt in relative safety, his legs giving way beneath him and the tears finally breaking through, he sobbed unashamedly for the friend he had lost and found, only to lose once more.

* * *

><p>He was being childish.<p>

They were on a mission that may very well decide the fate of the world, and here he was tucking himself away in one corner of the _Fiertia's_ deck, his knees drawn up, his face hidden in his arms. As far as he was concerned, the others were either inside the cabin or on the other side of the ship, and that suited him just fine. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to witness his private shame.

It wasn't like there was much else to do; the journey from here to _Heracles_ was up to Ba'ul now, and the others were taking the time to ready themselves for the inevitable upcoming battle. Karol wasn't sure if he'd ever be ready; hell, he had only just forced upon

himself the simple truth that he wasn't trapped in some horrific nightmare. Raven had betrayed them, Raven was the reason Estelle was in pain, and Raven had just barely managed to make up for it before he got himself killed to save them all.

It was a childish thought, but that didn't make it any less true: it _wasn't fair_.

Anger burned within Karol, closely accompanying the fresh grief that made itself most known. He didn't want to be angry with Raven, but that... that _idiot_ had made it so hard for him not to be. Karol's eyes, squeezed tightly shut and hidden in his arms, burned with held-back tears. Karol didn't even know for certain _what_ he was angry at. Raven's betrayal? His death? His insistence on making things so damn complicated? Maybe it was all of these things, and more.

Maybe he was saving a little bit of that anger for himself, as well, for never opening his damn mouth until it was too late, and not even finishing what he had to say when he did.

Karol didn't want the anger. He didn't want this complicated tangle of emotions battling for control within him, especially not with a battle coming up. He wanted a clear head. He wanted Estelle safe.

To hell with his anger, he wanted Raven _back_, damn it!

The wave of tears came so suddenly that he wasn't prepared for them. A choking sob tore from his throat, muffled but still audible, and when he tried to breath in, it was far noisier than it should have been. Mortified, Karol shut his mouth and curled up even tighter, forcing himself not to make a sound. The last thing he wanted was Judith, or Rita, or... or _Yuri_ to hear him acting like a baby. So, mortified and ashamed of himself, he hid his face from the world as the tears kept coming and sobs wracked his body silently, hitching his shoulders in his effort not to make a noise. He was glad Nan wasn't there to witness this, or to ridicule him for it. Maybe she was right about him, after all. The thought of that only brought more tears.

He wasn't prepared for the cold, wet nose that shoved itself against his ear. Karol jumped, raising his head with a startled, high-pitched gasp, revealing eyes wide and blurry with tears and two wet, salty tracks down either side of his face. Blinking, he let the tears in his eyes spill over, and recognized Repede standing beside him, his pointed ears and his lightning bolt of a tail drooping. Karol stared dully at the dog, wondering vaguely what he wanted.

The dog let out a high-pitched whine and glanced up to the side, to someone standing a few feet away that Karol, in his cloudy state of mind and attention to Repede's presence, hadn't yet noticed. The boy followed his gaze, and his heart sank.

He hadn't even heard Yuri come up.

Karol let his face fall back into the shelter of his arms. So much for no one witnessing this. He could hear the click of Repede's claws on the deck as the dog padded away, but Yuri didn't seem to be following him.

Clearly he was going to get ridiculed anyway. Karol scowled through his tears, refusing to look up at Yuri again. He waited for the young man to nudge him, to tell him to man up and stop crying, or to question his aptitude as a member of a guild.

Really, it just wasn't fair.

He could feel Yuri's footsteps on the wooden planks of the deck beneath him as his friend approached him. Karol's jaw tightened, but to his surprise he felt Yuri slide down to sit to his left. In the next moment, his friend's arm was wrapping gently around his shoulders.

Karol let himself sniffle, and warily waited for Yuri to speak. Yuri was silent for a while, and Karol was about to ask him what he wanted when the young man finally spoke up.

"You were trying to to tell him something, weren't you?" Yuri asked, his low voice quiet. "Raven, I mean."

Karol stiffened.

"I was too busy fighting to hear all of it, but by the sound of it you didn't get to finish," Yuri went on.

Karol remained silent, waiting for the inevitable question. He sniffled again and wiped his eyes.

"What were you going to say?"

Even if Karol had ever had any intention of telling Yuri, especially now that Raven was gone and it no longer mattered, he would not have spoken. If he made the slightest noise at this point, it would come out in that shaky tone he always had when he cried like this, or even worse, it would bring more tears. He'd been humiliated enough already. With his face still buried in his arms, he shook his head.

"Ah," Yuri said simply, sounding perfectly satisfied with this. "That's all right. None of my business anyway, I guess."

They sat like that for a few moments, as Karol fought to swallow the painful lump in his throat. Finally, when he could force himself to speak with minimal trembling, he addressed Yuri without looking up.

"Well?" he asked, his voice thick.

"Well what?"

Karol's stomach turned over, but he forged on ahead. "Aren't you going to tell me to stop?"

"Nah," Yuri said dismissively. "Why would I do that? Nothing wrong with crying."

"_You've_ never cried," Karol pointed out.

He heard his friend heave a sigh next to him. "Yeah, I have," Yuri replied simply. "And... it's okay to miss him, Karol." The arm around

Karol's shoulders was firm now, like half of a hug. "Just let it out. It's all right."

It's okay to miss him. A fresh flood of tears welled up in his eyes without warning, and his shoulders hitched again with it. Yuri's arm held him firmly but gently, and he gratefully leaned to the left so that he rested against his friend's side. It still hurt, but it was bearable. The shame was vanishing, to be replaced with a warm sense of security.

He felt home.

Had Tison ever done anything like this for Nan? Had he ever simply let her grieve for her lost parents, or offered her comfort? Come to think of it, had Nan ever even done this, just let her sorrow and anger flow out of her this way?

He doubted it.

To hell with the Hunting Blades; he didn't need those blunt, hard-headed fighters to praise him. Brave Vesperia was his guild now, and they took proper care of their own.

* * *

><p>The defeated Royal Guards on the side of the Heracles had been a boon, to be sure. The reappearance of the Schwann Brigade, on the other hand, set Karol's teeth on edge.<p>

He'd nearly broken down in front of them outside the Shrine of Baction already, and seeing them again so soon made him want to start throwing punches. Here they were, criticizing Yuri for his battle strategies while Estelle was still trapped by Alexei and their captain was dead.

Karol winced inwardly, the memory of crashing stone still a fresh hurt in his heart despite the good cry he'd had earlier. Frustration filled him, sent to the tipping point by the implication that, even after all that had happened, these three idiots were still going to get in their way.

"We Knights must do as our pride demands," LeBlanc insisted, sounding more pompous to the angry Karol's ears than he probably did in reality. Something within the boy, most likely what was left of his frayed patience, snapped.

"Come on, you guys, leave us alone!" he yelled, feeling some vindication when Rita backed him up. She, too, was still grieving for Raven, even if she showed it in a vastly different manner.

"Looking at you guys makes me remember a face that I'm trying hard to forget!" Rita snapped, never one to mince words.

Karol bit his lip, calling up a memory of Raven's â€" not Schwann's, Raven's â€" face, and hoped he never forgot it as long as he lived.

And then, for the second time in a fairly short period of time, a voice he had never expected to hear again took him by surprise and drawled out lazily from behind the knights.

"What sorta face do ya mean? Must be some poor sap with a pretty ugly mug."

Karol's mind went foggy again. He heard Yuri call out in shock.

"Raven?" he said, almost tentatively. He may have imagined it. Or he could just be dreaming. This sort of thing didn't happen, after all; people didn't just come back after they died, no matter how much you loved them and wished that they could.

Though perhaps, in this case, they did, because the knights were standing sharply to attention and his friends had voiced their shock alongside him. From there, Karol just about tuned out the proceedings around him and focused on wrapping his head around a single, impossible fact.

Raven was alive.

Somehow, impossibly, wonderfully, he was alive. Vaguely Karol wondered how it could be true, but trivial questions like that hardly mattered next to the simple fact that _Raven was alive_.

He felt as though his heart was swelling in his chest, and it was taking all his willpower to keep the wide, completely idiotic grin off his face. A twinge of guilt pricked at him painfully, and he frowned; he shouldn't smile when Estelle was still imprisoned, or when it was still Raven's fault that she was, or when Raven had such a wary, resigned expression on his face as he tossed his knife to Yuri.

Karol only tensed a little when Yuri approached Raven a bit ominously. Remembering the fates of Ragou and Cumore, Karol opened his mouth to protest, but he shut it just as quickly. He trusted Yuri to make the right decision, and to realize that Raven's words rang true, even if he had messed things up by handing Estelle over to Alexei. Amid his immense relief over Raven's survival, Karol allowed himself a small touch of resentment for what he'd done.

Which was probably why he took a small amount of guilty satisfaction when Yuri punched Raven solidly in the face, sending him momentarily reeling.

"From now on, your life belongs to Brave Vesperia," Yuri said flatly, flinging down the knife as though insulted that Raven had thought he would use it. "Whether you live or die is up to us." Then, placing one hand on his hip, he turned back to the others and caught Karol's eye with a grin. "Right?"

A laugh bubbled up within Karol, and he let it out gladly. "Heh-heh, good one, Yuri." As his friend moved away from Raven, Karol approached the old man that he'd come so close to losing.

Well, there was one good way to make sure he wasn't a ghost. Karol's fist connected with his face, and though he had to jump a little to reach it, it still felt reasonably satisfying after all the trouble Raven had put them through.

Brave Vesperia was a small guild of three people and a dog, after

all. Even though Raven had never officially joined, he was still one of theirs. So were Rita and Estelle, as closely tied to the Empire as they were.

They only needed one more, now, and then they would be complete again.

"You're not allowed to go dying on us, Raven," he scolded, once the rest of their party had dealt their own punishments. His rebuke would probably have been more effective if he could just keep his joy off his face, but it would have to do for now. They had a floating fortress to stop and a princess to save, after all.

* * *

><p>The moment the seemingly lifeless aer krene had started to glow amid the snow and ice, Karol knew they were in a whole new kind of trouble. Glowing aer-related things were never a good sign unless Rita meant for them to glow, and judging by the look on her face and the dark, winged monster roaring overhead, Rita hadn't meant for this one to glow.<p>

The strength fled from his limbs as the heavy, dense aer surrounded them all. The force of it drove him to his knees, and he realized with a stab of panic that there was no way he could lift his hand, much less his hammer, in this condition.

Disoriented, he looked around at the others for help; this was normally when either something stepped in or someone came through with a solution. Surely Rita, their genius mage, must have some idea of how to get out of this one.

Before he could get a good look at her, or call out to her, a powerful, solid force slammed into his side, knocking him to the ground and sending him tumbling head over heels across the frozen ground. He rolled to a crouch, shivering in the snow, before he realized that he was free of the aer prison. He could move again.

Karol blinked freezing water out of his eyes to see that Yuri, the only one close enough to have thrown him clear of the aer krene, was still trapped along with the others. "Yuri!" he yelled.

They had all been driven to their knees by the heavy aer, though Yuri was still straining in vain to free himself. Karol heard him call out as though he had to force the words from his mouth.

"Karol, run!"

There had been a time, perhaps, when Karol would have obeyed the order without question. Hell, there had been a time when he wouldn't have needed the order at all.

Of course, it was during those times that no one would have cared enough about his safety to give it in the first place.

"N-no way!" he protested, ignoring the trembling in his limbs. "You guys'll all get eaten up!"

Yuri had managed to raise himself up on his knees. "This isn't

something you can beat on your own!" he shouted in a tone that brooked no argument.

Karol opened his mouth to argue all the same. "Butâ€"

The monster swooped down upon him, roaring as it drove him farther away from his friends. Karol took shelter behind a small rise in the ice as it circled around to return to its trapped prey. Gripping his hammer in trembling hands, Karol crested the small ridge and took in the terrifying sight before him. The monster hovered over his motionless friends, as though silently gloating over its victory.

As though its victory had already been decided.

Karol tightened his grasp on his hammer, gritting his teeth. His loudest instincts urged him to run, to leave his friends to their fate the way he had back in the ruins, the way he often had with the Hunting Blades and with all the guilds he'd ever been in before. His other senses, the quieter ones that really mattered, were those that kept him right where he was.

The Hunting Blades had never needed him, nor had they wanted him.

Brave Vesperia had always wanted him, and now they needed him. Now he was their only hope.

With that realization, a strange chill settled over Karol, vastly different from the frigid weather around him. It was a comforting kind of cold, one that cleared his mind and his sight, so that he viewed the danger as though he watched from a distance. The trembling subsided as he hefted his hammer and spoke through lips numbed with cold. His voice sounded odd to him, not like his own voice at all.

"I gotta do this," he told himself sternly. "I gotta do it now." He could hear Yuri calling his name again, but it sounded far away. The fear had not vanished, but it was muted by his strange numbness. Yuri wanted him to run. They all wanted him to run. In truth, part of him still wanted to run, as well, while he had the chance.

He knew full well that if he ran now, he would run forever.

Karol brandished his weapon, crying out against the coward's instincts that remained. "Now or never!" The monster turned to face him, and he screamed his defiance at it.

The monster dove at him.

Time seemed to slow down for Karol, and he allowed himself the briefest of glances back at Brave Vesperia, just in case he was never going to see them again. His eyes fell upon Raven.

Raven, who he'd come dangerously close to losing. Raven, who this monster was intent on taking away again, along with nearly every person living who had ever given a damn about him.

Karol faced the monster again, and saw it through a haze of red.

The ensuing battle was a blur to Karol. He charged and attacked

recklessly, again and again as the winged monster beat him back. Grim satisfaction filled him whenever his hammer struck home, and whenever a well-aimed arte sent the creature staggering in midair. Deaf to his friends' cries, numb to pain, it wasn't until a particularly powerful blow from the monster sent him tumbling across the ice that his head cleared somewhat. He got back to his feet, shivering in his damp clothes, and charged in again to continue his assault. He told himself he should be careful, but the blood was pounding in his veins and his limbs were steadily beginning to ache. There was other pain as well, too sharp to be simple fatigue, that told him he'd been injured. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to ignore it. Yuri and Raven and Judith and the others needed him fighting, no matter what they said.

After a few more rounds of attacks, a strike from the monster's tail bowled him into the snow again. The red mist was clearing, the numbness of adrenaline fading. Still, Karol struggled upright, shoving an apple gel into his mouth and sighing as it brought some relief. "N-no problem," he insisted, more to reassure himself than anyone else. "Th-this is nothing!"

He was slower now, allowing the monster to catch him by surprise and send him stumbling back again. His legs were shaking again, though this time it was from weariness, not fear. Suddenly, it was a battle just to stay upright.

"I've got to protect them," he murmured. "No more running..." _I will never run away again. Never._ He tried to throw himself into the fight again, but the creature's tail whipped out, striking him broadside and sending his hammer flying out of reach. Karol staggered, clutching at his aching ribs. He stood unarmed before the airborne predator, staring down and seeing flecks of dark blood in the snow.

Judith and Yuri were crying out to him desperately.

"Karol, stop this! It's crazy!" Calm, collected Judith, always the placid voice of reason, was raising her voice at him.

"I can't watch this," he heard Yuri growl behind him. "I told you to get out of here!"

They all cared. They all cared so much. A strange sort of peace had settled over Karol, and suddenly his wounds didn't seem to hurt so much.. "I-I'm fine," he told them, his voice calm.

"You most certainly are not!" Even Rita, for all her harsh words and blows, only wanted him safe.

Well, he wanted her safe, too. He wanted them all safe. Was that so much to ask?

He was smiling. Like a complete idiot, he was injured and staring certain death in the face, and he was smiling. What was there to smile about? Damn it, what _wasn't_ there to smile about?

He wasn't sure he could put it into words for them, but he did his best as the creature above him readied itself to attack again. "No, it's all right," he told them steadily, without turning to look at them. He didn't have to look at them to know they were there. "You

guys are all here with me." He had friends. Was that all he'd wanted? Of course it was. He'd done a good day's work, going out hunting for eggbeats the day he'd met Yuri and Estelle.

"Karol... don't..." Yuri's strained voice was resigned. Karol understood. Of course he did. Yuri was prepared to die; for Yuri, it had only ever been a matter of whether Karol would die with them.

"You're all right behind me," Karol went on, heedless. "So no matter how bad I'm beat up, I can't lose." He meant it in both ways; he couldn't lose if he wanted to save them, but even if he could never fight again, or even if he... if he died that day, he would still have won.

It was no small comfort to hear Raven's voice behind him. "Move, damn it!" he growled. Karol sighed inwardly. Of course Raven still wanted him to run, too.

But Raven wasn't finished. "If ya don't, the kid's gonna..." Karol blinked, confused. What had Raven meant, saying that? He was "the kid," wasn't he?

He felt a pang as he realized that Raven had been talking to himself.

He'd gone from guilds that thought him useless to a group of friends who wanted him safe, no matter the cost to themselves. He'd really gone up in the world, hadn't he?

Ahead of him, protruding from the expanse of ice between him and the monster, was one of the many swords that littered the Blade Drifts. It was the only weapon within his sight. He straightened, wincing, and prepared himself for one last desperate run. If he could only just reach the sword before the monster reached him, then perhaps he could kill it, or wound it, something.

With his friends' cries in his ears and the roaring monster descending toward him, he ran flat out to the sword, sending snow flying with each step. When he was within a few yards of it and the monster was nearly upon him, he flung himself toward it in a flying leap. His hand closed around the hilt, just as a powerful blow from the monster sent him flying high up into the air.

At first he was disoriented and frightened, not knowing up from down as he reached the zenith of his flight and plummeted back down to earth. In nearly a second both were wiped clean, and his head cleared. He gripped the sword in both hands, feeling a strange, alien courage course through him like liquid fire.

The monster was below him. Karol aimed as he fell, pointing the massive blade downward. "You're mine!" he shouted, and the blade plunged into the monster's body.

It was only a wounding blow, and Karol dropped the rest of the way to the ice below. The fall knocked the wind out of him, but somehow he managed to struggle to a kneeling position and look to his friends as he fought for air.

The unnatural glow from the aer krene was gone, and they were all

were racing toward him, all five of them. Karol gasped for breath, relieved but still winded and not quite ready to get back to his feet.

They all came to a halt in front of him, standing together like an honor guard between him and the injured monster. Raven was right in front of him, speaking in a voice made soft by concern.

"How the hell did he pull that off?" Karol's heart swelled at the note of awe in Raven's tone. "Hey, is he alive?"

Karol managed to inhale. "Hey, guys." In a moment, he would be able to stand again, but for now his legs might as well have been made of rubber.

"Sorry we're late, traffic was awful," Yuri said airily, though there was a touch of worry in his voice when he added, "You doing all right?"

"Yeah, of course." It was an automatic answer, but a truthful one. If he lived through this, he would be walking on air for weeks. "All right," simply did not cover it.

"All right, let's pay this guy back double for all those knocks you took!"

Karol rose to his feet, and the sight of his friends rushing into battle before him lent renewed strength to his body. With his new sword in hand, he charged after them.

All around him, his companions shouted encouragement to him as they fought.

"We're with you this time!" Rita, casting spell after spell furiously at the wounded monster.

"We're gonna do this together this time." Yuri, echoing the mage, wielding his sword powerfully.

"With all of us here, heh, this is nothin'." Raven, his bow drawn back, sending an arrow straight into the creature's eye.

Judith fought on wordlessly, though Karol caught sight of the approving smile she sent his way. Repede, growling around the dagger in his teeth, sent a whirlwind of magic at the monster above him.

It was easy, now, with his friends by his side, to fight and finally slay the monster that had come so perilously close to killing all of them. It wasn't completely clear to Karol whether it was Yuri's sword, Rita's spells, or Raven's arrows that finally brought the creature crashing down to the churned-up snow, but perhaps that was the point. They had all killed it. Together.

Karol stared blearily at the slain monster lying lifelessly amid the ice. The sword slipped from his grasp, and the strength fled from him all at once. He felt dizzy and sick all of a sudden, and the whole world had turned into an unfocused white blur with splotches of color where his friends were.

The boy listed backward, and the freezing snow beneath him cushioned

his fall. Rita was saying something, but he hadn't the strength to register her words. He sighed, and the world faded to black.

* * *

><p>Karol floated in silence and darkness. He was cold and utterly drained, and the simple task of opening his eyes seemed like wishful thinking, but never in his life could he remember feeling so comfortable.<p>

Gradually, he became vaguely aware of things around him. He was damp and chilled by the wind, but he lacked the energy to shiver. Only his back was cold; his front was draped firmly against something warm and solid, but he could feel no ground beneath him. Something held him up against the warmth by his legs, and his right elbow rested on something solid, in such away that his arm stuck straight out in front of him. His left arm dangled down at his side.

He concluded that he was dreaming. How else could he explain this bizarre yet strangely comfortable position?

As the world around him slowly materialized, he realized that his head was resting on someone's shoulder, the side of his face leaning comfortably against the crook of the same person's neck and jaw. He could feel scratchy stubble against his ear and cheek, and bushy hair tickling the back of his neck. Karol strained to pry his eyelids apart, but they may as well have been made of lead for all he could manage. He gave it one final effort, and caught a flash of purple and yellow before the blackness overtook him again.

A chill ran up his already cold spine.

He was riding on Raven's back.

Karol's heart sank low in his chest. Well, it was definitely a dream, then. There was no way something like this would ever happen in real life. He'd had dreams like this before, in which things went on around him as sounds and feelings in pitch-darkness. Whenever he managed to open his eyes to see their source, the sounds and feelings would vanish to be replaced by the waking world.

Karol stopped trying to open his eyes. This wasn't the sort of dream he wanted to wake up from yet.

He would have loved to press himself closer, or to wrap his arms around Raven's shoulders and cling there like a small child, but his body was still too heavy to move an inch.

He wished that it was real.

He wished that, even when he did wake up, he could open his mouth and tell Raven what he so desperately wanted him to know, what he hadn't had the chance to say back in the Shrine of Baction. Because Karol had always been a coward, and one tough battle was not going to completely do away with that instantly. He could charge into every battle from here on out without so much as a flinch, and still he knew that he could never finish the sentence that Schwann had callously interrupted.

At least, not in real life. In a dream, it didn't matter, did it? If

Karol could never tell him when he was awake, well, then maybe he could say it now, and pretend, just for a little while, that he wasn't as much of a coward as he knew he was.

* * *

><p>Raven grumbled about carrying Karol, but it was more for show than anything else. He would carry the kid from here to Zaphias if he needed to, and he would still owe him more than he could give.<p>

Besides, he hated the cold. Working harder warmed him up, and the boy's unconscious form kept his back warm, if nothing else. But that was hardly the point.

He'd known all along that Karol was strong, somewhere under all that bluster and uncertainty. He hadn't gauged just how strong, but he'd known all the same. The kid had just needed a different kind of toughening up, the kind that the Hunting Blades didn't know how to provide.

Raven would have dearly loved to see Clint's face, had the guild leader been there to watch Karol face down a giant black bat-monster while wielding forty steel pounds of "fuck you". He was already privately forming a plan to squeeze an apology out of Clint for treating that kid like crap, if they all managed to get out of this in one piece.

Again, he would still owe the kid so much, and not only because he'd nearly lain down his young life partly on Raven's behalf.

He couldn't recall all of the things Schwann had said to the party, including to Karol, but he could remember enough that he wanted to forget the rest if he could. Though, that desperate, pleading look he'd seen on Karol's face, just before the boy had fled the collapsing chamber in Baction, was branded into his memory now and would probably haunt him for the rest of his life.

Rita was far too kind. "Idiot" hardly did him justice.

A faint, barely audible noise near his ear broke through his thoughts. It was a brief, wordless murmur from Karol's closed mouth, as though the boy was about to wake up. There was no shift in the weight on Raven's back, however, no stirring to indicate that something had roused him. His arm still hung heavily off Raven's right shoulder as though it were made of lead.

The kid was still asleep, then, and even if he wasn't, there was no way he could stand in this condition. Raven carefully shifted his hold of Karol so that the boy settled more securely against his back.

"_Mrm... Raven...?_"

The man almost froze where he was at the sound of his whispered name. Karol's voice was faint, his speech slurred, but Raven knew what he had heard. Somehow, as exhausted as he was, the kid was managing to talk.

"_Couldn't tell you b'fore..._"

Raven's blood ran cold when he recognized the words. Karol had tried to tell him something, back in Baction, but Schwann had gotten in the way before he had the chance. The kid hadn't mentioned it since, and Raven had no intentions of asking him to. He was considering rousing Karol before he said something he would regret later if he remembered it, when Karol's soft voice reached him again.

"_...but if my dad were anyone..._"

The notion of waking the boy promptly vanished, and Raven waited on bated breath for Karol to finish.

"_...anyone in the world... I'd want him to be you._"

Raven abruptly halted in his tracks amid the falling snow. He closed his eyes, which now stung with what he knew was more than the cold, as he waited for his mind to stop reeling at what he'd just heard. A painful lump of guilt formed in his throat.

"What's the matter, old man?" Yuri called back to him from the head of the group.

If any of the others noticed the way his voice cracked when he answered, they didn't say anything. "N-nothin'," he replied. "Just catchin' my breath, is all."

"C'mon, old man," Rita urged him. "Alexei isn't going to wait around for us to catch up to him, you know."

Raven didn't trust himself enough to speak again, so he simply nodded and walked on. None of the others questioned him further, though he didn't like the far too knowing look Repede aimed his way.

"Damn, Karol, all the people in the world ta say that to, and ya pick me?" he murmured sadly, too quietly for the others to hear over the wind. "It's hard enough without you givin' me somethin' else ta live up to." As gently as he could he inclined his head to the side, so that it rested briefly against Karol's. It was the closest thing to a hug that he could manage at the moment. "I don't deserve that kinda praise, ya know that?"

If the soft but insistent answering mutter from the boy was any evidence, Karol stubbornly disagreed.

* * *

><p>When Karol became aware of his surroundings, he expected to find himself lying down in a sleeping pallet, or in the cabin of the Fiertia if he'd been out that long. The first thing he wanted and the last thing he expected was to find himself once more warm in front and cold in back, in an all too familiar position. This time, however, he could hear voices around him; in particular, someone was speaking right next to his ear.

"...look like an exit ta you?" He knew that voice. Was he dreaming again? Without thinking, he let his eyes flutter open briefly, and then close just as quickly.

He wasn't dreaming. He was, however, still riding on Raven's back and

how the hell did that happen?

Once surprise and confusion had made themselves known, they were quickly replaced by panic. If it wasn't a dream now, then it probably hadn't been a dream before, which meant... which meant...

Karol's blood ran cold, and he nearly wailed aloud in dismay. He'd told Raven, hadn't he? He'd been stupid enough to assume he was dreaming, and he'd told Raven what he'd thought he would keep a secret forever. Raven knew, and as soon as they knew he was awake, he was going to have to face him about it. The thought made his stomach turn over.

Nearby, he could hear Rita's teasing voice. "Tired already?"

Karol continued to feign unconsciousness as Raven walked forward, probably in the direction of everyone else. If he wasn't careful, they'd notice he wasn't quite as asleep as he wanted them to think.

Raven's voice sounded right next to his ear again. "We old folks lack stamina. Judith, be a dear and take him for a spell." He didn't sound serious; there was always a certain playfulness in his voice whenever he complained about his age. Still, Karol could feel his face grow warm with worry. What if Judith took him seriously? Could he pretend to sleep through a change of carriers?

"Oh, I wouldn't _dream_ of stealing your job from you," Judith replied cheerily, and Karol went even limper with relief.

His reprieve was cut short when Yuri spoke up. And addressed _him_.

"Karol, you're awake, aren't you?"

He panicked. He couldn't help it. Yuri was great, and if Raven was like his dad, then Yuri was like his older brother, but why did he have to pick _now_ to be so unhelpful?

"N-no I'm not!" It slipped out before he could stop it, and he shut his mouth and waited for Raven to react. Dread filled him, giving him an awful twisting in his stomach. He would have happily faced ten of those black winged monsters rather than Raven now, especially since he had no idea what to expect.

Which was why he was completely unprepared when Raven dumped him unceremoniously in the snow.

"Forcin' a poor old man ta work in this cold," Raven chided him playfully, driving some of the dread away. He paused a moment before he went on. "Mister Karol, you're made of tougher stuff than I might've guessed."

In the space of a split second, Karol tried vainly to swallow his apprehension and looked up at Raven with a clear question in his eyes. He knew he was wearing his anxiety plainly on his face, but that hardly mattered at this point, after he'd all but poured his heart out to Raven by accident.

What he got in return was a tilted head and a heartfelt, if

embarrassed, lopsided grin that told Karol more than Raven could probably have put into words. That spark of humor that was so uniquely Raven, that had caused Karol such grief by vanishing for a time, was there in his eyes as strong as ever. It was different now, though; there was a certain firm resolve to it that Karol had never noticed before.

Maybe Schwann wasn't as gone as he'd thought, after all. Maybe there was still a little bit of him left over that was a permanent, immovable part of Raven, and possibly always had been. And maybe, just maybe, that wasn't a bad thing.

So great was his relief that for a moment he could only smile shyly back, and it took him a little longer than it should have to notice that Yuri had asked him if he was all right.

Karol got to his feet, considering the question. He had saved the lives of his friends. They probably wouldn't have all survived if he'd run like they told him to. But he could never have faced that monster alone, or have gotten himself out of the Blade Drifts afterward.

The memory of a deep voice, rough and gravelly but no less kind, came back to him in an instant. _So then ask fer help. That's what friends're for, right? Take good care of them, and they'll be there whenever you need them._

He had, and they were.

Karol faced Yuri, the smile on his face doing little to fully express the joy he was feeling. "Yeah," he replied, and marked it off as the understatement of the year.

* * *

><p>I partially have my brother to thank for the little scene with Karol's exhausted confession to Raven. I had the basic idea for the scene already, but after he waxed poetic about it while subtly manipulating my emotions through the power of music (the "Romantic Flight" track from the How To Train Your Dragon soundtrack, to be exact), the scene pretty much wrote itself. Thanks, mbulsht, I owe you one.**

End
file.